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SUBJECT: WIDENING THE DEMOCRATIC SPACE IN SERBIA

Summary

11. (SBU) Civil society representatives report a growing sense that right-wing groups and conservative political elements within Serbia are stifling public speech. Threats against human rights activists, journalists, and media outlets who provide alternative views of the political situation continue. Post continues to condemn publicly such threats and strongly conveys to government officials our position that free speech is necessary for growing a stable democracy. Civil society in Serbia is alive and functioning but requires continued support to weather the difficult situation ahead.
End Summary.

NGOs Report Sense that Alternative Views Not Welcome

12. (SBU) Post's contacts in the human rights NGOs believe the political space for airing alternative views is diminishing as a Kosovo resolution approaches. Sonja Biserko of the Helsinki Committee told poloff on December 19 that the tabloid press, politicians, and right-wing groups had long lashed out at human rights NGOs via public statements and multi-page newspaper spreads decrying NGO leaders for "attacking" Serbia, break-ins at their homes, and threatening letters to NGOs. Biserko said human rights NGOs harmed the interests of conservative, often corrupt, politicians and businessmen. Natasa Kandic of the Humanitarian Law Center said such incidents were likely to increase in the coming months. Biserko said politicians also were simply ignoring alternative views and closing the media space. Speaking at an event on International Human Rights Day December 10, Biljana Kovacevic-Vuko said ordinary people believed the political climate resembled that of the 1990s when the state stifled all dissent.

B92 Radio Show Stormed

13. (U) Threats and demonstrations against media outlets airing alternative views also continue. Nationalist demonstrators prevented an on-air public discussion held by popular B92 radio show Pescanik (Hourglass), which offers political commentary often critical of government policy. In November, the show's producers had tried hosting the show in the central-Serbian town of Arandjelovac, but local officials cancelled the show, citing its "anti-Serbian character." Pescanik rescheduled the event for December 3, but, before the discussion started, approximately 200 members of the New Serbia Party (NS - a government coalition partner) and the Radical Party, led by Topola mayor Dragan Jovanovic (NS), stormed the event as it was beginning. The demonstrators took over the microphone and physically attacked some of the attendees.

14. (U) Jovanovic later defended his actions and told daily Politika in an interview on December 5 that B92 "might be set on fire." NS released a statement December 4, stating that the demonstration had been an appropriate defense of Serbia and the constitutional order from the Liberal Democratic Party's and B92's "anti-Serb campaign."

President Boris Tadic (Democratic Party) and chief of G17 Plus (another coalition partner) Mladjan Dinkic issued statements condemning the December 3 incident.

Encouraging Civil Society

15. (SBU) As part of post's ongoing support for media freedom and civil society in general, on December 21, post jointly issued with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and eight other embassies a press release supporting a free and independent media, operating without fear and threats, as necessary to open dialogue in a democratic society. Ambassador also met with Serbian public officials to insist that they address threats against the media. Post regularly engages with journalists and human rights defenders and continues several programs that support an active civil society, for example, grants to support civic education programs.

Comment

16. (SBU) Civil society in Serbia is alive but under stress, due to the polarizing situation surrounding Kosovo status. Such threats are a real concern, and some of our contacts report that they fear the international community will look the other way in the desire to help Serbia move toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Post is working hard to reassure journalists and human rights defenders that we value their work as essential to democracy. As Kosovo and other polarizing issues develop, post will continue to work with NGOs, media, and political leaders to maintain and increase the space for true dialogue. It is especially important that we keep sending a message to political leaders that we will not tolerate threats against civil society, and that we expect vigorous prosecution of any acts against free speech. End Comment.

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